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ABSTRACT

Social support has been studied in the context of its relationship to and effect on negative experiences. While this buffer aspect of social support is important, support may also play a satisfaction-enhancing role. Both the negative event-buffering and positive event-boosting effect of social support on students' satisfaction with their college experience were investigated. A questionnaire on life stress and social support was completed by 312 community college students. Subjects reported which of 100 events had occurred recently; whether the event was a positive, negative, or neutral experience; and who they had talked to or received assistance from about the event, i.e., family, friends, teachers. Data from Anglos, Mexican-Americans, and mature women students were analyzed. Results provided evidence for boosting and buffering effects of social contact on satisfaction with college. Different types of people served different types of supportive functions. Teacher support appeared to enhance the effects of positive school events on satisfaction with college. Family support did not appear to enhance the effects of positive events but reduced the negative effects of negative events. The supportive effects of friends were obtained only for the Mexican-American group and only as a buffer against negative events. The findings suggest that enhancing the positive as well as reducing the negative aspects of life experiences is an important aspect of life adjustment. (Author/NRB)

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On Buffers and Boosters:
Social Support for Negative
and Positive Life Events.

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1.

On Buffers and Boosters:
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and Positive Life Events

When we think about the effects of people's social contacts on their satisfaction with life and psychological distress we have traditionally focused on the protective role of such contacts. Much of this theory and research has suggested that the sense of social integration, the instrumental and affective assistance people receive help to buffer them against the negative effects of life's stressful experience (e.g.; Caplan, 1974; Meyers, Lindenthal & Pepper, 1975). Thus social support is most often studied in the context of its relationship to and effect on negative experiences.

While research on this buffer aspect of social support is important, one can conceptualize a second focus for the effect of social support. It is reasonable to suggest that support may play a satisfaction enhancing effect. That is, contact with people around positive events may boost the positive effects of such events on life satisfaction. What evidence is there for this boosting effect? Conceptually if we look at the definitions of social support it is reasonable to suggest that such support occurs around positive as well as negative experiences. For example, Cobb (1976) views support as information that one is loved, esteemed, valued and belongs to a network of communication and mutual obligation. Clearly such communication can occur in transactions around positive as well as negative experiences.

The present study investigates both the negative event buffering and positive event boosting effect of social support on student's satisfaction with their college experience. Consistent with the support as buffer model it was suggested that the negative effect of negative events would be weaker if people are supported. Consistent with the support as booster model, it

was hypothesized that positive events for which people are supported would more strongly predict satisfaction than would positive events for which people were not supported.

Method

This study was done as a part of a large three year multi-disciplinary research project investigating adaptation processes within a community college. The larger project primarily used ~~ethnographic~~ methodology; including participant observation and interviewing of students, teachers, student service personnel and administrators at the college. In a qualitative sense that ethnographic data has facilitated our understanding of our quantitative results.

Subjects and procedure

A paper and pencil questionnaire on life stress and social support was administered to 312 students in the community college. This represented a completion rate of approximately 56% from a sample of convenience, drawn from a wide range of classes at the college. Students completed the questionnaires anonymously either at home or during class time. The data from three subsamples of students are used in the present study; Anglos, Mexican-Americans and mature women students. Descriptively the Anglo students had a mean age of 25.5 years; 53.4% were female and 46.6% were male. The Mexican-Americans had a mean age of 23.7 years; 35.4% were male and 64.6% were female. Mature women in college have been a group of increasing interest in higher education, have developed their own self-help movement on campus and have been the subject of prior interest by researchers in the area of social support. Thus we thought that they would be an interesting sub-group. They were defined in our study as being over age 25 (average age of 36.7) and being either married,

widowed, divorced or separated.

Measures

The major research instrument was a significant life event instrument which we developed specifically for community college students. The events were generated by structured interviews and open ended questionnaires administered to 226 students, 12 faculty members and the directors of 5 student service programs on campus. The intent was to develop a representative list of experiences that knowledgeable people report as being impactful on students. A list of 100 events were generated. Twenty-eight of these events specifically concerned school experiences and are utilized in the present study. Some items are: Increased mastery of school work; Increased problems with school work; Significant change in the amount of school work you are required to do. The response format asked the student to report whether the event occurred during the past semester and whether it was a good, bad or neutral event (5 point scale). Then for each event which occurred, students were to indicate who they "either talked to or received assistance from about the event." They were to indicate this by placing a precoded letter to indicate the type of person next to the event. They could indicate more than one type of person for any event. Three major types of informal supporters were included: family members, friends and teachers, as well as each of the student service on campus. The measures of life events and support we derived from this instrument were:

1. Number of positive school events.
2. Number of positive events about which they talked with a) friends, b) teachers and c) family members.
3. Number of positive events which they did not talk with each support group about

4. Number of negative events
5. Number of negative events for which they received assistance from each support group.
6. Number of negative events for which they did not receive assistance from each support group.

Insert Table 1 about here

Each of these measures was used as a predictor of a measure of satisfaction with college. Satisfaction with college was assessed using a 10-item instrument which asked the students to report how they feel about different aspects of their college experience. Some items are: Your education at the Community College; The students you go to school with; What you are learning in college. Each item was rated on a seven-point scale (anchor points of "delighted" and "terrible"). Internal consistency reliability was assessed as .81 using coefficient alpha.

Results

The results will be presented to assess the effects of support from all sources as well as from each type of person (friends, family and teachers) on each sub-group in the study. In each instance a contrast will be made between the correlations of the life event scores with and without that source of support and the Quality of school life measure.

The results of support from all types of people (teachers, family or friends) can be seen in Table 2. As can be, total negative events is a better predictor of school satisfactions than are positive events for both Mexican-Americans and Anglos. As expected, positive events were positively related to school satisfaction while negative events was inversely related,

although for mature women these relationships are weak and not significant.

Insert Table 2 about here

When the positive and negative event scores are sub-divided into those for which the student received support, the pattern of correlations with school satisfaction is supportive of the hypotheses. For each sub-group, positive events for which students receive support are significantly correlated with school satisfaction, while unsupported positive events are not. Similarly the negative relationships between negative events and school satisfaction tend to be stronger for unsupported than supported negative events. Although the trend seems clear it should be noted that the differences between the correlations (tested using Hotelling's t) are not significant.

The results became clearer when the effects are looked at separately by support groups. Before presenting that data it should be noted that a problem of restricted range attenuated the possible correlations of negative supported events (for each specific source of support) with school satisfaction for the Mexican-American group. Thus, that data will need to be interpreted cautiously.

The second set of data concerns support received from teachers. For all

Insert Table 3 about here

three groups there was evidence for a positive event "booster" effect of teacher support. The results were particularly strong for the Mexican-American group where the positive events with teacher support correlated .61 with quality of school life. Support for a negative event buffer effect was directionally obtained for both Anglo's and Mexican-Americans, with the effect for An-

6
glo's being statistically significant.

As can be seen in Table 4 a different pattern of results is obtained for family support. For all three groups substantial support is obtained for a negative event buffer effect, while there is no evidence of a support booster effect from support for positive events.

Insert Table 4 about here

Table 5 presents the results for friend support. Only one significant effect was obtained. For Mexican-Americans, friend support appears to reduce the negative effect of negative school events on satisfaction with college, although the previously mentioned attenuation problem requires that we view these results cautiously.

In sum, the results provide evidence for both a booster and buffer effect of support, and that different types of people serve different types of supportive functions. In particular, teacher support appears to enhance the effects of positive school events on satisfaction with college. Family support appears not to enhance the effects of positive events but to reduce the negative effects of negative events. Most surprisingly, the supportive effects of friends was obtained only for one group (Mexican-Americans) and only as a buffer against negative events.

Discussion

The results generally provide evidence confirming both the boosting and buffering effect of social contact on satisfaction with college.

Evidence for a positive event booster effect was found primarily for teacher support. When we consider that the criterion variable was satisfaction with college we can readily see how this effect may work. Doing well on

a paper may provide information that one is a good student, but talking with the professor about the paper might reinforce the information that one is associated with a community which esteems such behavior. It is interesting to note that this effect was strongest for the Mexican-American sub-group. One might speculate that the informational value of such positive support might be most impactful on students who are a more marginal part of the setting.

The negative event buffer effect was obtained most clearly for family members and to a lesser extent for teachers and friends. It is interesting to note that the stress buffer and booster effect do not necessarily come from the same source of support. That is, someone who might help a mature woman student cope with the stresses of attending school (e.g., family) might not be the same person who can help her obtain maximum satisfaction from the school experience (e.g., teacher).

On a methodological note it should be pointed out that the assessment of support as tied directly to the events on a life event scale is a relatively new approach. In that sense the data is encouraging for pursuit of that technique.

Programmatically the study has important implications. It reinforces some notions that community psychologists have espoused to the point of cliché. If we are interested in people's life adjustment we should focus both on enhancing the positive as well as reducing the negative aspects of their life experiences. Secondly, our goals are best pursued by working with the significant others in people's natural environments. Our data suggests that such efforts might productively focus on the satisfaction enhancing as well as stress reducing aspects of these social relationships.

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Table 1

Predictors VariablesNumber Positive School Events (PSE)

# Family Support	(P Fam)
# No Family Support	(P No Fam)
# Friend Support	(P Friend)
# No Friend Support	(P No Friend)
# Teacher Support	(P Teacher)
# No Teacher Support	(P No Teacher)

Number Negative School Events (NSE)

# Family Support	(N Fam)
# No Family Support	(N No Fam)
# Friend Support	(N Friend)
# No Friend Support	(N No Friend)
# Teacher Support	(N Teacher)
# No Teacher Support	(N No Teacher)

Table 2

Total Informal SupportPositive School Events

	<u>QSL</u>
Total	.14
Supported	.19*
Not supported	-.04

$$t_{dr} = 1.72^* (1 \text{ tail}, 130 \text{ df})$$

Anglo (N=133)Negative School Events

	<u>QSL</u>
Total	-.25**
Supported	-.16*
Not supported	-.23**

Mexican-American (N=30)

	<u>QSL</u>
Total	.20
Supported	.41*
Not supported	-.03

$$t_{dr} = 1.54 (ns)$$

	<u>QSL</u>
Total	-.52**
Supported	-.16
Not supported	-.58**

$$t_{dr} = 1.96^* (1 \text{ tail}, 27 \text{ df})$$

Mature Women (N=32)

	<u>QSL</u>
Total	.23
Supported	.38*
Not supported	-.03

$$t_{dr} = 1.47 (ns)$$

	<u>QSL</u>
Total	-.12
Supported	.14
Not supported	-.28 ^a

$$t_{dr} = 1.59 (ns)$$

* $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ ^a $p \leq .06$

Table 3

Teacher SupportPositive School EventsNegative School EventsAnglo (N=133)

	<u>QSL</u>
Total	.14
Teacher support	.22**
No teacher support	.00

$$t_{dr} = 1.80^* (1 \text{ tail}, 130 \text{ df})$$

	<u>QSL</u>
Total	-.25**
Teacher support	-.03
No teacher support	-.30**

$$t_{dr} = 2.45^{**} (130 \text{ df})$$

Mexican-American (N=30)

	<u>QSL</u>
Total	.20
Teacher support	.61**
No teacher support	-.02

$$t_{dr} = 2.59^{**} (27 \text{ df})$$

	<u>QSL</u>
Total	-.52**
Teacher support	-.27
No teacher support	-.54**

$$t_{dr} = 1.08 \text{ (ns)}$$

Mature Women (N=32)

	<u>QSL</u>
Total	.23
Teacher Support	.30*
No teacher support	.08

$$t_{dr} = .79 \text{ (ns)}$$

$$* p \leq .05$$

$$** p \leq .01$$

	<u>QSL</u>
Total	-.12
Teacher support	.10
No teacher support	-.18

Table 4

Family SupportPositive School EventsNegative School EventsAnglos (N=133)

	<u>QSL</u>
Total	.14*
Family support	.15*
No family support	.03

$$t_{dr} = .89$$

	<u>QSL</u>
Total	-.25**
Family support	.00
No family support	-.33**

$$t_{dr} = 2.69^{**}, 130 \text{ df}$$

Mexican-American (N=30)

	<u>QSL</u>
Total	.20
Family support	.20
No family support	.14

	<u>QSL</u>
Total	-.52**
Family support	.18
No family support	-.53**

$$t_{dr} = 1.71^* (1 \text{ tail } 27 \text{ df})$$

Mature Women (N=32)

	<u>QSL</u>
Total	.23
Family support	.18
No family support	.14

	<u>QSL</u>
Total	-.12
Family support	.20
No family support	-.33*

$$t_{dr} = 2.05^* (29 \text{ df})$$

* $p \leq .05$

** $p \leq .01$

Table 5

Friend SupportPositive School EventsNegative School EventsAnglos (N=133)

	<u>QSL</u>
Total	.14*
Friend support	.08
No friend support	.09

	<u>QSL</u>
Total	-.25**
Friend support	-.22**
No friend support	-.17*

Mexican American (N=30)

	<u>QSL</u>
Total	.20
Friend support	.06
No friend support	.19

	<u>QSL</u>
Total	-.52**
Friend support	.01
No friend support	-.63**
* $t_{dr} = 3.20^{**}$ (27 df)	

Mature Women (N=32)

	<u>QSL</u>
Total	.23
Friend support	.16
No friend support	.16

	<u>QSL</u>
Total	-.12
Friend support	.01
No friend support	-.13

* $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$